

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
REMARKS AT BRUSSELS CONFERENCE
10 May 2022

Thank you so much Joseph, Ministers, Excellencies, colleagues, and friends,

1. Let me start by saying the obvious, that as the conflict in Syria has developed over the past 11 years, we have witnessed suffering and abuses on an immense scale; terrible violent conflict that went beyond all norms; a humanitarian catastrophe that has devastated the lives of well over half the population; a displacement crisis on a scale with few comparisons; a crisis of detention, abduction, and the missing; an economic disaster that has immiserated millions of Syrians; the fragmentation of the country; and the continued threat of terrorism.
2. All of this continues today: suffering continues; displacement continues and few Syrians returns; the economic crisis continues; and violence continues, with constant risk of escalation – even if there is something of a military stalemate. Tragically, Syrians have never needed your support more than they do right now.
3. Over these years, my predecessors and I have continuously called for a nationwide ceasefire and a comprehensive Syrian-led and owned political solution - one that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, that respects Syria’s sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity.
4. But let me be frank. We are far from that political solution.
5. The Constitutional Committee’s Small Body will meet again in Geneva at the end of this month. The previous seven rounds have not brought about the results we would have liked. But I hope that this upcoming round can at least bring about some incremental progress. I have appealed to all members to approach the session with a sense of compromise and constructive engagement, and to focus on things on which Syrians can begin to agree.
6. Of course, I hope that ultimately the Committee can help establish a new social contract to help heal the wounds of a devastating conflict. But even were Syrians to agree on the substance of a constitutional reform or a new constitution, it could not unfold inside of Syria in a truly meaningful way, with conditions the way they are today.
7. Work is needed to establish a safe, calm, neutral environment inside Syria, starting with confidence-building measures, as Resolution 2254 mandates. In that spirit, I have been seeking to identify areas where consensus might be found on a series of reciprocal confidence-building measures that could be implemented in parallel, step-for step. I have consulted many of you here, drawing on your advice, and let me indeed thank the European Union for its strong support, and I look forward to continuing these discussions.

Excellencies,

8. Confidence-building measures must also serve to diminish the agony felt by countless Syrian families, whose family members are detained, abducted or missing. I have long stressed the need for some new signal, some opening, on this vital file.
9. I have noted with interest that, on 30 April, a presidential decree was issued, granting what is stated to be a general amnesty in relation to terrorism charges. Many see this as a potentially important new development given that a large number of Syrians could potentially benefit. We have also seen spontaneous reactions of Syrians hoping their loved ones may be among those released.
10. The Syrian Government's Ministry of Justice has said that several hundred detainees were released under the amnesty - some of whom reportedly had served long prison sentences - with more releases to follow. We are not yet in a position to independently verify this, but I hope very much, that when I visit Damascus later this month, I will be able to obtain first-hand information from my interlocutors there and discuss how we can build on this.
11. Meanwhile, I hope that many more detainees will be reunited with their families in the days and weeks to come – through this latest amnesty or new amnesties as needed. This would send an important signal to all Syrians that progress is possible.

Excellencies,

12. Last week through our Civil Society Support Room I met a diverse group of 43 Syrian civil society participants, hailing from all parts of Syria. They demanded greater efforts for a sustainable political solution that would address the aspirations all Syrians. They recognized the crucial role that civil society can play in that process and in preserving some form of social cohesion. They called, unanimously, for information on the fate and whereabouts of their missing and the release of detainees and abductees, with many hoping that their own loved ones would soon be amongst those recently released. They expressed a fear that a decrease in humanitarian and early recovery funding would follow a lack of concrete progress in the political process.
13. Yesterday, I met the Women's Advisory Board, and I heard many similar messages on the overall situation. They also related consequences to Syrian women, children and families of ongoing economic strife. They described marriages involving minors, girls dropping out of schools, and more women entering the informal job market largely unprotected.

Excellencies,

14. My UN colleagues will later speak to the needs of Syrians, as well as the needs of those communities in the region supporting them. For my part, let me say that I am dismayed at the humanitarian catastrophe afflicting ordinary Syrian women and men and an entire generation of their children. Raw statistics will of course fail every time to convey the

brutal reality that afflicts so many Syrians. Syrians deserve so much better than struggling to meet their basic needs. I thank each and every country and organisations which has so graciously and generously aided Syrians in need throughout these past eleven years. Your contributions are once again urgently needed.

15. And I know that the head of OCHA Martin Griffiths will rightly remind us of the importance of continued actions to implement Security Council resolution 2585. It is clear that efforts to do more both cross-line and cross-border assistance must continue, that early recovery needs to be supported, and that this framework needs to continue into the future.
16. Let us always remember that Syrians across the country face a devastating economic crisis after more than a decade of war and conflict, corruption, mismanagement, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, and sanctions – and now the war in Ukraine and its economic spill over. This economic predicament will only fuel the displacement crisis and humanitarian crisis, with knock-on effects for stability in the region and beyond.

My friends,

17. Syria remains a highly internationalized crisis – and key issues require constructive international diplomacy. It is not secret, and we see it here today, that recent international developments, the war in Ukraine, have made that even more difficult than it was before. But as the UN envoy, I will continue to engage all key actors, Syrian and international, on the importance of contributing not only to alleviating suffering but to confidence-building and a political path out of this crisis.
18. My message will continue to be that which I gave the Security Council: don't lose focus on Syria. The current strategic stalemate on the ground and Syria's absence from the headlines should not mislead anyone into thinking that the conflict needs less attention or fewer resources, or that a comprehensive political solution is not urgent. I thank you all for your continued support.